The Women's Rights Movement, 1848–1917

The fight for women's suffrage in the United States began with the women's rights movement in the mid-nineteenth century. This reform effort encompassed a broad spectrum of goals before its leaders decided to focus first on securing the vote for women. Women's suffrage leaders, howeve disagreed over strategy and tactics: whether to seek the vote at the federal or state level, whether to offer petitions or pursue litigation, and whether t persuade lawmakers individually or to take to the streets. Both the women's rights and suffrage movements provided political experience for many of early women pioneers in Congress, but their internal divisions foreshadowed the persistent disagreements among women in Congress that emerged after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives
About this object (/Collection/Detail/25769818947)

Manufactured by the Whitehead & Hoag Company in Newark, New Jersey, this dime-sized button announces support for women's voting rights. The phrase "Votes for Women" was one of the suffrage movement's main rallying cries.

The first attempt to organize a national movement for women's rights occurred in Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. Led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a young mother from upstate New York, and the Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott, about 300 people—most of whom were women—attended the Sen Falls Convention to outline a direction for the women's rights movement.[2] Stanton's call to arms, her "Declaration of Sentiments," echoed the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be se evident: that all men and women are created equal." In a list of resolutions, Stanton cataloged econo and educational inequities, restrictive laws on marriage and property rights, and social and cultural norms that prevented women from enjoying "all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States."[3] Stanton also demanded for women the "sacred right to the elective franchise"—despite objections from Mott and others who considered this provision too radical. The convention eventually approved the voting rights resolution after abolitionist Frederick Douglass spok in support of it.[4]

Like many other women reformers of the era, Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, a Massachusetts teach had both been active in the abolitionist cause to end slavery. After first meeting in 1850, Stanton and Anthony forged a lifetime alliance as women's rights activists. Following the Civil War, they helped bu a movement dedicated to women's suffrage and pushed lawmakers to guarantee their rights during Reconstruction.[5]

After the emancipation of four million enslaved African Americans, Radical Republicans in Congress proposed a constitutional amendment extending citizenship rights and equal protection under the law all "persons born or naturalized in the United States." Whether those rights would include women was unclear, and debates in both houses of Congre focused on defining citizenship. Many Members praised the virtues of "manhood suffrage" and expressed concern about the inclusive language in ea drafts of the proposed amendment. Ultimately, the Fourteenth Amendment went as far as to define voting rights as the exclusive privilege of "male citizens"—explicitly adding gender to the Constitution for the first time.[6]

During the debate over the Fourteenth Amendment, Stanton objected to the use of "that word, 'male,'" and sent to Congress the first of many petitions supporting women's suffrage.[7] On January 23, 1866, Representative James Brooks (/People/Detail/41526) of New York read into the official record Stanton's petition along with an accompanying letter by Anthony. Some Members, including George Washington Julian (/People/Detail/16050) of Indiana, welcomed the opportunity to enfranchise women. In December 1868, he proposed a constitutional amendment to guarantee citizens the righ vote "without any distinction or discrimination whatever founded on race, color, or sex." Julian's resolution never came to a vote, and even Congressn who favored expanding the electorate were not willing to support women's suffrage.[8]

In 1869 Congress ignored renewed calls to enshrine women's suffrage in the Constitution while working to pass an amendment guaranteeing the voti rights of African-American men. The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified by the states in 1870, declared that the right to vote "shall not be denied or abridg by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." That year, Hiram Rhodes Revels (/People/Detail/20291) of Mississippi was elected to the Senate and Joseph Hayne Rainey (/People/Detail/20095) of South Carolina won election to t House. They were the first African-American lawmakers to serve in Congress.

During the congressional battle over the Fifteenth Amendment, Stanton and Anthony had led a lobbying effort to ensure that voting rights for women were included in the legislation. With increasing frequency, Stanton denounced the extension of voting rights to African-American men while restrictio on women remained. She praised the virtues of "educated white women," and warned that new immigrants and African Americans were not prepared

exercise the rights of citizens. Stanton's rhetoric alienated African-American women involved in the fight for women's rights, and similar ideas about race and gender persisted in the women's suffrage movement well into the twentieth century.[9]

In the wake of these setbacks in Congress, women's rights reformers responded by focusing their message exclusively on the right to vote.[10] But the women's movement fragmented over tactics and broke into two distinct organizations in 1869: the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). Stanton and Anthony created the NWSA and directed its efforts toward changing federal law. Eventually, the NWSA began a parallel effort to secure the right to vote among the individual states with the hope of starting a ripple effect to win the franchise at the federal level. The NWSA, based in New York, largely relied on its own statewide network. But with Stanton and Anthony giving speeches across the country, the NWSA also drew recruits from all over. Although California Senator Aaron Sargent (/People/Detail/21214) introduced a women's suffrage amendment in 1878, the NWSA campaign stalled. Meanwhile, Lucy Stone, a one-time Massachusetts antislavery advocate and a prominent lobbyist for women's rights, formed the AWSA.[11] As former abolitionists, the leaders of the AWSA had mobilized state and local efforts to flood Washington with anti-slavery petitions, and they applied that same tactic after the Civil War to advance women's rights, mostly at the state level. During the 1880s, the AWSA was better funded and the larger of the two groups, but it had only a regional reach.

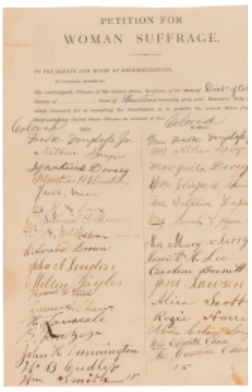
PETITION FOR
WOMAN SUFFRAGE.

Image courtesy of the National Archiv and Records Administration
About this record (/HouseRecord/Detail/15032436231)

Signed by Frederick Douglass , son of the famous abolitionist, a his wife, Virginia Hewlett Dougl this 1878 petition for woman suffrage asks the House and Senate to amend the Constituti and allow women to vote. The Douglasses topped the petition signed by many other African-American residents of the Uniontown neighborhood of Washington, DC, in what is toda Anacostia.

When neither group attracted broad public support, suffrage leaders recognized their division had become an impediment to progress. Historian Nancy Woloch described early suffragists' efforts as "a crusade in political education by women and for women, and for most of its existence, a crusade in search of a constituency."[12] The turning point came in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when the nation experienced a surge of volunteerism among middle-class women—activists in progressive causes, members of women's clubs and professional societies, temperance advocates, and participants in local civic and charity organizations. The determination of these women to expand their sphere of activities further outside the home helped the suffrage movement go mainstream and provided new momentum for its supporters.

By 1890, seeking to capitalize on their newfound constituency but still without powerful allies in Congress, the two groups united to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Led initially by Stanton and then by Anthony, the NAWSA drew upon the support of women activists in organizations such as the Women's Trade Union League, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and the National Consumers League. For the next 20 years, the NAWSA worked as a nonpartisan organization focused on gaining the vote in the states as a precursor to a federal suffrage amendment.[13]

Image courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol

Carved by Adelaide Johnson and on display in the United States Capitol Rotunda, this monument was given to Congress in 1921. It commemorates three founders of America's women's suffrage movement: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott.

But the suffrage movement was only so welcoming. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century civil rights and voting rights came under constant attack in large sections of the country as state polic and court decisions effectively nullified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. As the system of segregation known as Jim Crow crystallized in the South, African Americans saw protections for thei civil and political rights disappear, and few Members of Congress or suffrage advocates were willing fight for any additional federal safeguards. In an 1898 address to the NAWSA, African-American acti Mary Church Terrell decried these injustices, while remaining hopeful "not only in the prospective enfranchisement of my sex but in the emancipation of my race." African-American suffragists like Ter continued to struggle to expand access to the ballot. Their voices, however, could only be heard outs of Congress. In the House and Senate, those voices had fallen silent: from 1901 to 1929 no African-American legislator served in Congress. The promise of the Reconstruction Era—that American democracy could be more just and more representative—was undermined by an organized political movement working to restrict voting rights and exclude millions of Americans from the political process.[14]

West of the Mississippi River, the new activist climate and the creation of the NAWSA bore fruit. Wom had won complete voting rights in Wyoming in 1869, but almost 25 years had elapsed without anothe victory. After launching the NAWSA in 1890, however, women secured the right to vote in three other western states—Colorado (1893), Utah (1896), and Idaho (1896).

"Why the West first?" remains an enduring puzzle. Some scholars suggest that the West proved to be more progressive in extending the vote to wom in part, in order to attract women westward and to boost the population. Others suggest that women played nontraditional roles on the hardscrabble frontier and were accorded a more equal status by men. Still others find that political expediency by territorial officials played a role. All agree, though that western women organized themselves effectively to win the vote.[15]

Between 1910 and 1914, the NAWSA's intensified advocacy lead to successes at the state level in Washington, California, Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon. In Illinois, future Congresswoman Ruth Hanna McCormick (/People/Detail/17791) assisted as a lobbyist in Springfield where the state legislature adopted women's suffrage in 1913, the first such victory in a state east of the Mississippi. Women won the right to vote the next year in Montana, thanks in part to the efforts of another future Congresswoman, Jeannette Rankin (/People/Detail/20147).

Despite this momentum, some reformers pushed to quicken the pace of change. In 1913 Alice Paul, a young Quaker activist who participated in the militant British suffrage movement, formed the Congressional Union, later named the National Woman's Party (NWP), as a rival to the NAWSA. Paul' group adopted the British tactics of picketing, mass rallies, marches, and civil disobedience to raise awareness and support. The NWP's more confrontational style attracted a new generation of women to the movement and kept it in the public eye. As part of their campaign, the NWP relentles attacked the Democratic administration of President Woodrow Wilson for refusing to support a women's suffrage amendment.[16]

In 1915 Carrie Chapman Catt, the veteran suffragist and former NAWSA president, returned to lead the organization. An adept administrator and organizer, Catt authored the "Winning Plan" that called for disciplined and relentless efforts to achieve state referenda on women's suffrage, especiall nonwestern states.[17] Key victories followed in 1917 in Arkansas and New York—the first in the South and East. The 1916 election of Jeannette Rank of Montana to serve in the 65th Congress (/Congressional-Overview/Profiles/65th/) (1917–1919) crowned the "Winning Plan" campaign.

Catt's "Winning Plan" and Paul's protest campaign coincided with the United States' entry into World War I.[18] Catt and the NAWSA eagerly embrace the war, believing that women would quickly prove themselves in their support for the cause overseas and that extending the franchise at home woul an important step for national readiness and morale. Moreover, leading suffrage advocates insisted the failure to extend the vote to women might impede their participation in the war effort just when they were most needed as workers and volunteers outside the home.

Next Section (/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/No-Lady/House-Supports-Suffra

Footnotes

[2] David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (New York: Verso, 2014): 129; David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New Yor Simon & Schuster, 2018): 196. Standard biographies of these two women include Lois W. Banner, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: A Radical for Women's Rights* (Boston: Little, Brow and Company, 1980); and Margaret Hope Bacon, *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott* (New York: Walker Publishing, 1980).

[3] "The Declaration of Sentiments," Seneca Falls Convention, 1848. For more on the convention at Seneca Falls, its participants, and the larger movement it spawned, see Ell DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in the U.S., 1848–1869* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

[4] Laura E. Free, *Suffrage Reconstructed: Gender, Race, and Voting Rights in the Civil War Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015): 43; *History of Woman Suffrage, v* (1848–1861), ed. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881): 70–73, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28020/28 h/28020-h.htm. For an overview of the period from the Civil War through 1920, see Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, In 1994): especially 326–363.

[5] Sylvia D. Hoffert, *When Hens Crow: The Women's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 75–90; Free, *Suffrage Reconstructed*: 43.

[6] On the origins and passage of the Reconstruction Amendments in general, see David E. Kyvig, *Explicit and Authentic Acts: Amending the U.S. Constitution, 1776–1995* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), and Richard Bernstein with Jerome Agel, *Amending America: If We Love the Constitution So Much, Why Do We Keep Trying t Change It?* (New York: Times Books, 1993).

[7] Free, *Suffrage Reconstructed*: 105.

[8] Free, *Suffrage Reconstructed*: 115; Blight, *Frederick Douglass*: 488.

[9] Roediger, *Seizing Freedom*: 153, 156.

[10] See, for example, DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage*: 21–52; Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011): 327.

[11] For more on Lucy Stone, see Andrea Moore Kerr, *Lucy Stone: Speaking Out for Equality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

[12] Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*: 329–336.

[13] Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*: 334–335; Roediger, *Seizing Freedom*: 334–335.

[14] Mary Church Terrell, *The Progress of the Colored Women* (Washington, DC: Smith Brothers, Printers, 1898), https://cdn.loc.gov/service/rbc/lcrbmrp/t0a13/t0a13.pdf.

[15] See, for instance, Beverly Beeton, *Women Vote in the West: The Woman Suffrage Movement 1869–1896* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986); David E. Kyvig, *Expl and Authentic Acts*: 227; and the Women of the West Museum, "'This shall be the land for women': The Struggle for Western Women's Suffrage, 1860–1920," https://web.archive.org/web/20070627080045/http://www.museumoftheamericanwest.org/explore/exhibits/suffrage /index.html.

[16] For more on Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party, see Inez Haynes Gillmore, *Up Hill with Banners Flying* (Penobscott, ME: Traversity Press, 1964).

[17] For a biography of Catt, see Robert Booth Fowler, *Carrie Catt: Feminist Politician* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986); Kyvig, *Explicit and Authentic Acts*: 233.

[18] Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*: 353.

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